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ABSTRACT

Children who are teased on a school bus, in class, or during recess often do not want to return to school. Unfortunately, teasing can occur anywhere, and it is difficult to prevent--despite the best efforts of parents, teachers, and school administrators to create a more cooperative atmosphere. This Digest discusses different types of teasing (e.g., playful versus hurtful), why children tease other children (e.g., attention, imitation, or peer acceptance), and strategies for both parents and children to help them deal with teasing (e.g., self-talk, visualization, or reframing). The Digest points out that teasing can become harassment if it is repeated or prolonged, threatens or results in violence, or involves inappropriate touching or physical contact. In such cases, it may be necessary to involve administrators and parents in determining the appropriate course of action. (LPP)

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Easing the Teasing: How Parents Can Help Their Children

Judy S. Freedman

Children who are teased on a school bus, in class, or during recess often don't want to go to school. Unfortunately, teasing can occur anywhere, and it is difficult to prevent—despite the best efforts of parents, teachers, and school administrators to create a more cooperative atmosphere (Ross, 1996). Most young children become upset automatically if they are called a name or ridiculed in any way. Parents cannot always protect children from these hurtful situations, but they can teach their children useful strategies to help them deal with teasing. Young children who learn these coping skills at an early age may be better prepared for more significant social challenges and conflicts in their preteen and teen years. This Digest discusses different types of teasing, why children tease other children, and strategies for both parents and children to help them deal with teasing.

Types of Teasing

Not all teasing is harmful—playful teasing can be fun and constructive. Teasing and being the target of teasing can help young children develop social skills that they will need in adolescence and adulthood (Ross, 1996).

Playful or good-humored teasing occurs when it causes everyone to smile or laugh, including the person who is being teased. In contrast, hurtful teasing includes ridicule, name-calling, put-downs, and saying or doing annoying things. Unlike playful teasing, hurtful teasing may cause the person being teased to feel sad, hurt, or angry. More hostile teasing, which may include tormenting or harassing, may require ongoing intervention by a parent, caregiver, teacher, or school administrator.

Why Children Tease

Children tease for a number of different reasons:

- **Attention.** Teasing is a good way of receiving negative attention, and, unfortunately, for many children, negative attention is better than no attention.
- **Imitation.** Some children model or mimic what is happening to them at home by acting the same way to others at school or in the neighborhood. These teasers are children who may be teased by siblings or who experience aggressive or harsh parenting.
- **Feelings of superiority or power.** Many teasers feel superior when they put others down, or they may feel powerful when teasing upsets others (Olweus, 1993).
- **Peer acceptance.** It is not uncommon to see children engage in teasing behavior because they may perceive it as being the "cool" thing to do. It may help them feel part of a group. The need to belong may be so strong that a child may tease others to be accepted by the "popular" children.
- **Misunderstanding differences.** A lack of understanding of "differences" may be the underlying factor in some teasing. Many children are not familiar with or do not understand cultural or ethnic differences. In some instances, a child with a physical or a learning disability may be the target of teasing because she is different. Some children criticize anyone who is different instead of trying to learn or understand what makes others special.
- **Media influence.** One cannot discuss the reasons children tease without acknowledging the powerful influence of the media. Our children are frequently exposed to teasing, put-downs, sarcasm, and a lack of respect in many of the television programs geared toward children.

How Parents Can Help

Strategies for Parents

When your child experiences teasing, it is important to see the problem from the child's point of view. Sit down and listen attentively to your child in a nonjudgmental way. Ask your child to describe the teasing. Where is it happening? Who is the teaser? Understand and validate your child's feelings. It might be helpful to relate your experience of teasing as a child. The following strategies may also help:

- Do not overreact. A parent's overreaction can result in a child overreacting.
- Convey the message, "You can handle it."
- Encourage children to be with children who make them feel good, not bad.
- Review your own behavior. Do you model the behavior of a "victim," or do you tease your children inappropriately?
- Teach or review and practice the strategies discussed below.

Strategies Parents Can Teach Children

Teasing cannot be prevented, and children cannot control what others say; however, they can learn to control their own reactions. Parents can teach their children the simple strategies listed below that will empower them and reduce feelings of helplessness. When children realize that there are effective strategies that they can use in teasing situations, their coping skills are strengthened.

- **Self-talk.** Encourage children to think about what they can say to themselves when they are in a teasing situation (Bloch, 1993). A child could say to himself, "Even though I don't like this teasing, I can handle it." A child should ask himself, "Is the tease true?" Often it is not. Another important question is, "Whose opinion is more important . . . the teaser's or mine?" It is also helpful for the teased child to think about her positive qualities to counteract the negative remarks.
- **Ignore.** Displays of anger or tears often invite more teasing; therefore, it is often effective for children to ignore the

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teaser. The child who is being teased should not look at or respond to the teaser. Children should try to pretend that the teaser is invisible and act as if nothing has happened. If possible, walking away from the teaser is encouraged. Parents can role play "ignoring" with their children and praise children for their excellent "acting." It should be noted that ignoring may not be effective in prolonged teasing situations.

- **The I message.** The "I message" is an assertive way for children to effectively express their feelings. The child expresses how he feels, what has caused him to feel that way, and what he would like others to do differently. For example, a child could say, "I feel upset when you make fun of my glasses. I would like you to stop." This strategy generally works better when expressed in a more structured or supervised situation, such as a classroom. When used in other situations, such as recess or on the school bus, it may lead to more teasing when the teaser perceives the child being teased is upset. Nevertheless, it is an easy skill to teach children to help them deal with many situations. The child should learn to make eye contact, speak clearly, and use a polite tone of voice.
- **Visualization.** Many young children respond well to visualizing words "bouncing off" of them. It provides them with the image of not having to accept or believe what is said. This image can be created by showing how Nerf balls bounce off a person. Another effective visualization is for a child to pretend he has a shield around him that helps the teases and bad words bounce off. Again, this technique gives children the message that they can refuse these put-downs.
- **Reframing.** Reframing is changing one's perception about the negative comment; it is turning the teasing into a compliment. For example, a child teases another about her glasses, "Four eyes, four eyes, you have four eyes." The child being teased could politely respond, "Thanks for noticing my glasses!" The teaser is usually confused, especially when there is not a reaction of anger or frustration. Another child might respond to a tease by saying, "That is a *great* put-down."
- **Agree with the facts.** Agreeing with the facts can be one of the easiest ways to handle an insult or tease (Cohen-Posey, 1995). The teaser says, "You have so many freckles." The teased child responds, "Yes, I have a lot of freckles." The teaser taunts, "You are such a cry baby. . . ." The teased child can answer, "I do cry easily." Agreeing with facts usually eliminates the feeling of wanting to hide the freckles or the tears.
- **"So?"** The response of "so?" to the teaser conveys an indifference that the tease doesn't matter. Children find this response simple yet quite effective. This strategy is humorously addressed in Bill Cosby's book *The Meanest Thing to Say*.
- **Respond to the tease with a compliment.** When a child is teased, it is often effective to respond with a compliment. For example, if a child is teased about the way he runs, he can answer, "You are a fast runner."
- **Use humor.** Humor shows that little importance is placed on the put-downs or mean remarks. Laughing can often turn a hurtful situation into a funny one.
- **Ask for help.** At times, it is necessary for a child to seek adult assistance or intervention if the teaser is persistent.

When Teasing Becomes Harassment

Most types of teasing can be dealt with effectively by the children involved, sometimes with the assistance of parents, caregivers, teachers, social workers, or counselors. Teasing becomes harassment, however, if it is repeated or prolonged, threatens or results in violence, or involves inappropriate touching or physical contact. Adults should be alert to the possibility of harassment and intervene as needed if harassment is suspected or anticipated. In such cases, it may be necessary to involve administrators and parents in determining the appropriate course of action to end the harassment.

Conclusion

You can help your children understand that teasing cannot be prevented, and they cannot control what others say. However, they can learn to control their own responses and reactions, which will "ease the tease."

This Digest was adapted from Freedman, Judy S. (1999, Spring). Easing the teasing: How parents can help their kids cope. Early Childhood, *pp. 1, 4.* *Ms. Freedman is a licensed clinical social worker at Prairie Elementary School in Buffalo Grove, Illinois, and developer of a stress education program for children and parents. Her email address is info@easingtheteasing.com.*

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